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RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID PRIORITY 0532  
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT PRIORITY 0829  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1690  
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NSC FOR ABRAMS  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/11/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TERROR THREAT IN TUNISIA: WHAT HAPPENED, WHY AND  
HOW WE SHOULD REACT

REF: A. TUNIS 54 (NOTALS)  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 53  
[1](#)C. TUNIS 49  
[1](#)D. TUNIS 44  
[1](#)E. TUNIS 31 AND PREVIOUS  
[1](#)F. TUNIS 29

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (S) Over a two-week period in late 2006 and early 2007, the Government of Tunisia conducted operations against a significant terrorist group, killing 12 and arresting 15. At least two GOT security personnel were killed and three wounded in the operations. The "Salafi" terror group, according to senior GOT representatives, intended to attack the US and UK Embassies and/or specific USG and UK officials.

The terrorists had assembled an arsenal of weapons, including explosives, at several locations and were trained to use them. While the GOT deserves congratulations for its success (and condolences for the Tunisian officers who died), it still has not shared with us critical information on the group and its plans. While little consolation, the GOT has shared even less information with other foreign missions and virtually nothing with the Tunisian public. As a result, rumors are rampant and include reports that the terrorists intended to kill President Ben Ali or (more credibly) attack tourist sites. In the absence of information from the GOT, we believe there is more to this case and that it is likely to take quite some time to secure a full account.

[1](#)2. (S) Tunisians have been shaken by these events. Ben Ali was shaken too, and reportedly reacted by replacing the head of Customs. We expect further personnel changes, including possibly in the cabinet. In light of the threat and the disturbing failure of the GOT to cooperate fully, senior USG officials should stress the urgent need for further GOT information sharing and press for better bilateral engagement generally. With the GOT operations against the "Salafi" terror group representing the latest of a series of events across North Africa, we may be in the middle of a terror push

across the region, possibly coordinated by the GSPC and/or under the umbrella of al Qaeda. END SUMMARY.

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What We Know  
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¶3. (S) To date, our principal information on the terror network from the GOT has come from the Ambassador's meetings with three key Ministers (at the MOI, the Presidency, and the MFA, see refs A, B, and D). In those meetings, the GOT has provided important, but very limited details and there has been some variation in what has been presented. Most importantly, the GOT has yet to provide some key information, including, notably, a reported list of US officials targeted by the terrorists. Minister of Interior Belhaj Kacem, who is titularly responsible for domestic security matters, offered almost no specifics on the threat against US interests in Tunisia, even when pressed (ref A). This series of meetings make it clear that information about the group, and GOT security operations to take it down, has been and will continue to be tightly controlled. Judging by the body language in the Belhaj Kacem meeting, we do not expect to receive more detailed information any time soon, despite promises from the Foreign Minister.

¶4. (S) To summarize, we have received the following information from GOT sources:

-- GOT security forces conducted operations against an armed group of "Salafists" between December 23 and January 3 to disrupt attacks reportedly planned to coincide with the end of the year.

-- At least two Tunisian security personnel were killed and three wounded; 12 members of the armed group were killed and 15 arrested.

-- The group had been preparing attacks against the US and British embassies. The group had detailed plans of both Embassies, including images of the facilities obtained from Google-earth.

-- A list of US and British diplomats was allegedly found among the group's belongings, suggesting the group may also have been targeting specific members of those diplomatic missions.

-- The group, comprised of 27 men, was armed with locally manufactured explosives and had other significant weapons. The group was well trained, with some members possibly trained in Afghanistan.

-- The group was operating out of multiple locations in the Hammam Lif/Hammam Chatt/Grombalia/Soliman areas.

-- At least six of the group had come out of Algeria and had originally been identified for the GOT by a friendly intelligence service.

-- Most of the group was Tunisian. The leader may have been Mauritanian (or, perhaps, was a Tunisian using a false Mauritanian passport).

¶5. (S) However, press reports and contacts offer differing accounts, which raise concerns about the group's actual intent and the credibility of GOT information provided to us.

For example, the MOI official statement on the December 23 event suggested the initial shoot out was a chance encounter.

However, Minister Ben Dhia subsequently told Ambassador the GOT had initiated the attack when it appeared the group had fully assembled and was ramping up its planning. There are also many reports the group intended to target tourist sites, large French department stores (e.g., Carrefour), and the Sheraton hotel. In addition, in a statement posted on an Islamic web site, a group calling itself "The Youth of Tawhid and Jihad in Tunisia" (Monotheism and Holy War in Tunisia) claimed responsibility for the incidents. Subsequent

reporting on an official GOT web site (infotunisie.com) denied that a group by this name is active in Tunisia. This report attributed the allegedly false claim of responsibility to two individuals resident in Tunisia who have since been arrested. None of these reports have been officially confirmed.

¶6. (S/NF) The shroud of secrecy hanging around the investigation and what has been revealed to date also raises questions about the GOT's intent in sharing the information. Given the long-standing official line that rapid political reform offers a space for non-democratic Islamists and terrorists to seize control of the political realm, there is a self-serving nature in telling the USG "Salafi terrorists" are threatening US interests in Tunisia. Always seeking to play the counterterrorism card against the democratization argument, the assertion that the USG is a target, while certainly plausible, raises questions. We consider it possible that, to protect its important tourism industry, the GOT has downplayed the possibility the terrorists intended to attack tourists. (Note: Regardless, the Embassy has taken the reported threat as very serious and has taken a number of steps to enhance our security and warn American citizens. These are reported in ref C. An additional, lengthy EAC meeting has been held and will be reported septel.)

¶7. (S) GOT officials have said, repeatedly, that the threat is "over," while acknowledging that they are continuing investigations into possible support networks. We have no basis on which to judge the accuracy of the claim that this particular group has been "rounded up," but we consider it unlikely. Even if true, we believe there are almost certainly other Salafis and sympathizers in Tunisia who may pose a threat to the United States.

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What It Means  
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¶8. (S) Ben Ali has historically demonstrated that he is very adept at compartmentalizing information and power to ensure no single individual can threaten his rule. Despite this reputation, many believe that First Lady Leila Ben Ali's Trabelsi relatives have an inordinate amount of influence over the most important decisions. The inability of three senior ministers to share an appropriate level of details lends credibility to one report that the entire operation was run out of the Presidential Palace in Carthage, perhaps by officials -- or individuals -- hidden from the public eye. One credible report suggests that the First Lady has brought back former MOI Secretary of State for National Security Mohamed Ali Ganzoui to retake control of the domestic security situation -- perhaps as a special presidential advisor.

¶9. (S/NF) The use of what have been reported to be sophisticated weapons in a country largely devoid of simple rifles quickly added fuel to what were already widespread rumors of the Ben Ali clan's corruption. We have heard rumors, often in hushed tones, that it was certain that the First Lady's Trabelsi clan was involved, as they are the only ones who can circumvent Customs inspection procedures. Another Tunisian noted that "every Tunisian" wants to believe that the Trabelsis are involved, given widespread dislike for the family's alleged corruption. Post has heard unconfirmed reports that the head of Customs was summarily sacked following the incident, supporting a rumor that he had told Ben Ali directly that he had "no authority" to search some containers. There are reports that there may be other personnel changes by the President as he seeks to shore up his security apparatus.

¶10. (S) At the same time, the event and the Ambassador's meetings shed some light on inter-ministerial relations. As the USG, and the GOT, have historically limited security cooperation to intelligence channels, it was unusual that Foreign Minister Abdallah was the first to notify Ambassador

of the threat. While Abdallah noted that he had to "get Ben Ali's permission" to share the information, Ambassador's subsequent ministerial-level meetings indicate there are no official GOT talking points for the USG on the matter. Ben Dhia's information contradicted some items Abdallah said, while Belhaj Kacem treated his pre-arranged courtesy call with Ambassador as just that, offering little in the way of additional information.

¶11. (S/NF) Despite initial information indicating that US and UK interests were the intended target of the group's activities, we see no indication that the GOT intends to put an end to official and media anti-American rhetoric. Throughout 2006, senior Cabinet officials denounced those who cooperated with the USG as traitors. As recently as January 9, a press editorial was repeating this theme, noting that "we don't need the opinions of those...who contact embassies...go to conferences in America...(and) sell political positions for dollars." Such statements, combined with the GOT's apparent decision not to make this threat information public, suggest that the highest levels of the GOT have no intention of publicly denouncing anti-USG rhetoric. In fact, the nominally independent press continues to publish accounts of Saddam's "martyrdom," fueling anti-US sentiments.

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What Should We Do About It?  
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¶12. (S/NF) The extent of information being shared, and the speed with which the GOT has been sharing it, is unacceptable, particularly in light of direct USG monetary and substantive assistance to GOT security services. Ambassador has repeatedly made this point, and Post used the

January 11 visit of NEA DAS Carpenter to press again for more details (see septels). However, in the absence of a substantive GOT response in the coming days, Washington officials should engage on this issue. We ask that the Department call in Ambassador Hachana at a high level to make the point that we need better cooperation. We urge the Department to include a specific request for the reported target list. In addition, all levels of the USG should, using the strongest possible language, use available opportunities to press GOT interlocutors for an immediate, detailed response.

¶13. (S) As we pursue details of the threat, we should not lose sight of the fact that these incidents may open the door to seek improved bilateral cooperation on a range of security matters. We have long pressed for improved information sharing and liaison and can offer additional assistance to facilitate GOT cooperation in these areas. As recently as December, Minister of Defense Morjane told Ambassador he needed additional bilateral military support to improve his Ministry's supervision of Tunisia's borders (ref E). The infiltration by six members of the armed groups underscores this point. If the GOT can provide sufficient details about the threat, our support could -- and should -- be further tailored to respond to needs voiced by the GOT.

¶14. (S) We note that the take down of this Tunisian terrorist cell is just one of several troubling incidents across the region. We may well be in the middle of a GSPC or possibly al Qaeda push across the Mahgreb. In light of this, we should press forward with efforts underway to strengthen regional cooperation on counter-terrorism by both countries and our missions. As one step, we should look to hold the planned Mahgreb Ambassador's meeting at a very early date.

¶15. (S) Finally, while the GOT should be congratulated for successfully rolling up a terrorist group, this incident has highlighted a gap in the US-Tunisian bilateral relationship. While we clearly have a shared interest in preventing terrorism, and have done much to reinforce cooperation, the GOT's response to this incident and our demands for greater information sharing suggests our partnership remains too

one-sided. As we look at the long-term bilateral relationship, we should remember that in one of the most serious bilateral matters to occur in years, potentially relating directly to the security of our Mission and personnel, the GOT once again failed to step up to the plate.

GODEC